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THE ETHICS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

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THE important fact with which we have to deal in the ethics of the Old Testament is that in its substantial entirety the book was in the hands of Jesus. It was the basis of his teaching. He spoke with authority and brought a new revelation, but that revelation authenticated itself by the appeal to the Old Testament Scriptures. He speaks of them as if they discharge an organic function and must ever hold a permanent place in the religion of which he was the founder. Even when he points out their deficiencies, and supersedes the details of the law by principles of far-reaching simplicity, he never fails to impress the fact that in the Old Testament he sees the abiding word of God. Jesus' habit in this matter fixed the habit of his disciples, so that the testimony to the Old Testament, and the usage of the Old Testament, in the New, are uniform. Jesus declares that what proceeded from the mouth of the prophets was spoken by the Lord (Matt. 1:22, etc.). The promises to the patriarchs, and the token of guidance which they followed, were vouchsafed by him (Acts 3:25). The commandments of the Mosaic law came from him (Matt. 15:4). And throughout there was the continuous self-communication of the Holy Spirit in men, a progressive unfolding of the purposes of God and a constant indication of his requirements.

In estimating the ethical and religious value of the Old Testament, therefore, it is entirely immaterial whether, as it is, it be considered authentic history or not, or when or by whom the various books were written. Whatever its source, or whatever its historical value, as an ethical code and a standard of religious teaching it was in its entirety indorsed by our Lord. We escape no difficulty in its interpretation by any view that we may advance as to its history, or by any attempt to distinguish

within it as to what we think authentic and original, and what not. We may say that the story of the fall is a legend; that the story of the sacrifice of Isaac is no better—or, if it is true, that Abraham got his cue from the heathen, and God did not command or desire such an offering; we may believe that the exterminating wars of Israel sprang from their own bloodthirstiness, and that Samuel's hewing Agag in pieces was atrocious; but the Old Testament seems surely to represent these things as commanded of God, or essentially related to his plan of governing his chosen people, and to the unfolding of his kingdom and revelation. We only obscure the real question and entangle ourselves in further difficulty when we fail to recognize the actual situation.

The fact is that the Old Testament not only cannot be separated from the New, but occupies an equally vital place in the story of redemption. It constitutes a substantial part of the sum total of revelation, without which the rest would be largely unintelligible, as well as incomplete. It must therefore be oriented to the whole course of the development of revelation, and any interpretation that would be adequate must start with this fact, and must deal with its problems as belonging to conditions which are wholly its own. It represents a distinct period of the slowly unfolding kingdom of God on the earth. It antedates the New Testament as the Roman republic does the empire, and like that it represents a distinct stage of history, and belongs to a different civilization. But the stage that follows cannot be understood apart from that which precedes. The historic line is unbroken, and the roots of the present are only to be found in the past. The superficial thinker may be content with what lies before his eyes; and for many it is enough to say that the New Testament contains the springs and furnishes the norm of all that we need to know about religion; but if we fail to understand its relations to the Old Testament, or if we carry about with us the consciousness that the Old Testament presents problems for which we have not the key, or teaches a morality that is in contradiction to that which we accept, our system, however beautiful, will have feet of clay.

It is of the first consequence, therefore, that we find some scheme of interpretation for the Old Testament which is satisfactory. It presents a series of acts on the part of chosen individuals and the elect nation which sometimes are both cruel and immoral, and these are often presented as specifically commanded by God; as, for example, the sacrifice of Isaac, the extermination of the Canaanites, the authorization of the avenger of blood and of human slavery, and of retaliation for evil.

It is often urged in justification that these are permitted by God, but not commanded; and again, that whatever God commands must in its nature be right, as Calvin defended the spoiling of the Egyptians on the simple ground that God ordered it. But neither answer is adequate or meets the facts of the case. The problem is an old one in the history of Christianity, and its perpetual reappearance is witness of its importance. It was a main grievance with the old Manichæan heretics. They could not tolerate the Old Testament saints. The patriarchs, the judges, the prophets, the kings—they regarded all as involved in one charge of immorality, barbarism, guilt, and bloodshed. They could not possibly understand how a high saint could have many children, still less how a patriarch could have several wives, or how a judge under the impulse of inspiration could slay a thousand men with the jawbone of an ass. The irregularities of the Jewish saints shocked and disgusted them, conflicting as they did with every standard that they knew of sublimity and sanctity. Moses, in spite of the moral scope of his legislation, was to them intolerable. They inveighed against his cruelty, his judicial slaughters, his exterminations. They asserted that when our Lord said that all before him were thieves and robbers, he referred to the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament. The altar, with its bloody rites, its circumcision, and its sacrifices, they denounced as only a form of paganism. Augustine's reply was suggestive. He asked: "Did they not at last understand how precepts and counsels and permissions are changed, with no inconstancy in him who gives them, but by the wisdom of him who dispenses them, according to the difference

of the times?"¹ The church has stood by its faith through the centuries, but there is need for working out Augustine's defense in a more thorough and satisfactory way.

Our starting-point must be to recognize the fact, which Jesus emphasizes, that the Old Testament religion is a self-accommodation to the low moral standard of those whom it was designed to instruct. This he reiterates in the Sermon on the Mount and affirms in his reference to the hardness of the ancestral Jewish heart. The starting-point of the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews is that the Old Testament revelation was, by force of its conditions, imperfect and limited. The prophets themselves recognized that the old covenant was already old and nigh to vanishing away. As Principal Ottley² says: "The old covenant was marked by inherent deficiency. It was powerless to secure the obedience it enjoined, it was burdensome as a law of positive precepts and ordinances, in relation to the removal of sin it was absolutely ineffective." Or, as Professor Bruce³ puts it, "the Bible supplies a rule that is constantly improving on itself, and the later editions of the rule are intended to antiquate the earlier." In other words, in the Old Testament we are dealing with the childhood of the world, in which revelation is compelled to limit itself to the comprehension of its subjects. It must speak so that they can understand. It must start with them where it finds them. It must lead them along lines in which they of their own volition can walk, that character may grow step by step, and that the obedience which man renders to God, whether as the initial step in the growth of childhood, or as the first efforts at return from the degradation of a fall, shall be the foundation of a permanent development, and shall constitute a real advance toward that ultimate condition in which man is at last to see God and be like him. Therefore, as Principal Ottley truly says (p. 333): "In the Old Testament we are dealing only with the intuitions and presages of holy men divinely anticipating the future solution of their perplexities. In their searching of heart we are enabled to study the spiritual needs

¹ *Contra Faustum*, XXII, 77.

³ *Apologetics*, p. 323.

² *Aspects of the Old Testament*, p. 313.

which God's self-revelation in Christ was designed to satisfy—needs the very consciousness of which was inspired by him."

But we are entirely in the wrong when we carry back into the Old Testament the standards of the New, or read its narratives and attempt to interpret their teaching according to the standards of our own age.

Let us take, for example, the sacrifice of Isaac. Suppose we accept it as a positive command of God, and then ask: How is it to be interpreted? Such a command belongs to the realm of the miraculous. Now, a command enjoined in connection with a miracle can be received only when it lies within the range of the moral understanding of the person to whom it is addressed. It would be impossible, for instance, for a Christian man of this age to accept as coming from God a similar command, no matter by what miraculous appearance it might be attested. His pre-conceptions of God and of the nature of his law would absolutely preclude the possibility of orders to slay his son. He would doubt the origin of the miracle, or his own understanding of the command. God simply could not enjoin such an act. The story is told of John Tauler praying in his retirement for more of the presence of Christ, and being answered by a vision of the Savior clad in kingly garments, with a golden crown, who came to give him his blessing and approve his ministry. The eager saint drew back. He said: "You cannot be my Lord, who was despised and rejected, whose only crown was thorns, and whose hands were pierced with the nails." The vision disappeared, and he knew it was a temptation of the devil. When, therefore, turning to Abraham, we find so startling a command unquestioningly accepted, we must seek our interpretation in the conceptions of that day and Abraham's understanding of what the God whom he had learned to trust would reasonably expect of him.

We find that in that stage of the world's history the individual, as we understand the term—by which every man by virtue of his being human is entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—was unknown in the world. It is indeed a conception fundamental in modern civilization, but one of the

last products of that civilization, not even yet wholly attained or understood. A wife and a child, no less than a slave, in Abraham's time were a form of property belonging to the father, or the family, or the tribe. It was long afterward before Rome took away from parents or masters the power of life and death over children and slaves. When Abraham therefore received in miraculous form the command to offer his son in sacrifice, it was to him but a summons for a supreme surrender of his choicest possession to that Lord in trust in whom he had already forsaken his home, his native land, and his friends. It was simply a final act in taking up his cross and following him. It conflicted directly with God's promise to him of descendants, but there was nothing incongruous in the same God who had given him in such a remarkable way that son, demanding his sacrifice. As the writer to the Hebrews says, it was entirely possible for him to obey the command with undisturbed faith that "God was able to raise him up even from the dead." From the standpoint of his times it was not only a moral but a wholly righteous act; not only one that God had a right to enjoin, but one that furnished the only possible test of his supreme obedience, and the only sufficient means of opening to him the highest attainments of spiritual character.

Something parallel to it may be found in our own day, when an only son, the joy and pride of his father, and upon whom the father has lavished his love and his care, in the hope of preparing him to be the staff of his old age, and the successor and perpetuator of his business or his plans, stands before his father asking his consent to his offering himself as a missionary to the heathen. There are those today to whom this appears almost, if not altogether, an immoral request; while from the days of Harriet Newell it has been a supreme act of consecration. We recall the story of the Roman consul Titus Manlius crowning his son for the victory he had won over the enemy, and then ordering him to be put to death for disobeying the law of the state. The splendid vision before his mind was always Rome, to whom he owed himself and all he had, and for the preservation of whose honor the sacrifice of a son, even in the hour of

his greatest glory, was not too costly a price. Abraham's vision was not of Rome, but of that God whose voice he had heard afar off, with whom he had talked as a friend under the stars of the Judean hills, and to whom as the Lord and the home of his soul he had, once and for all, surrendered all things.

From our standpoint nothing could seem more brutal or wantonly cruel than the reiterated command that the Israelites should exterminate the Canaanites, men, women, and little children—not a soul was to be left. So strenuous was the command that again and again they are rebuked for their imperfect obedience; and in successive generations their lapses into transgression and their bitter suffering under punishment are charged to this neglect. How is it to be interpreted? The cup of the iniquity of the heathen was full; and God had set out to create and preserve over against them a peculiar people through whom righteousness was to be kept alive on the earth, and the world at last redeemed to God. The sole condition upon which the family should grow into the tribe, and the tribe be consolidated into a nation that might have hope of persistent life and remain true to its revelation of God, was that an enduring barrier should be created between it and the nations by which it was surrounded. Their ways were not to be its ways, as its God was forever opposed to their gods. The ever-present danger was that Israel should be lured by the luxury and vices of her neighbors, or beguiled by association with them. The inevitable intermingling of the life of the contiguous peoples would mean the complete destruction of the new life that had been established, and the thwarting of the divine plan for righteousness. A wall must be created at the beginning between the people of God and the heathen. The land they were to occupy must be made free from its curse, and the unfolding lives of the chosen people secured from heathen contact. This becomes at once the sufficient justification of that extirpating of the roots of wickedness which is paralleled by the clearing of the land of the settler before his first harvest can be sown, and as his warfare is perpetual with the recurring crop of thorns and thistles, so the labor of the Israelite was the unending one of securing the little field which

God had given to him from the choking thorns and the destroying thistle of heathen iniquity.

The avenger of blood also was a divine appointment. When a human life had been taken, instantly the nearest of kin found himself summoned by divine decree to lay aside all considerations of safety or ease, to refuse all offer of money compensation, and to give himself, at whatever cost or peril, to the vindication of that supreme idea of justice and of retribution which God has planted in the human heart, and which lies at the foundation of all possible development in civilization or in individual character.

The law of retaliation, that is, loving your neighbor and hating your enemy, while not expressed in a single phrase, is found present in spirit. The enemy was the heathen, against whom Israel in her national life, her religion, and her conceptions of character and of worship was arrayed. And when the enemy arose nearer home, he was the embodiment of those false gods against whom the God of Israel waged perpetual war, antagonism to whom, with all the force of personal revulsion, and even all the violence of the imprecatory psalms, was the natural expression of the struggling faith.

Does not all this represent an imperfect morality? Yes, so far as the dispensation went, or the particular events in which morality is revealed; but looked at as a whole, regarded with reference to its design and final achievement, it becomes Christian morality. If we see not in it the roots out of which with our later intelligence the finest flowers of Christian civilization have been bred, yet here, at the beginning, are found the great principles of absolute surrender to a holy God, separation from the world, with the strenuous struggle for justice and righteousness, the deep and permanent consciousness of the guilt of transgression, and the beginnings of the true sense of brotherhood, into which the world today is slowly but surely coming, and in which alone lies the promise of that redeeming grace which teaches men to love one another because God has first loved them. Throughout all, from the beginning to the end, runs the thread of the redemptive purpose which marks the course of the revelation of God in a sinful world.

Looking at the details we find there are three forms of the divine command: a definite command to do a once forbidden thing, given to a man whose heart is set in opposition to the will of God, a command that may be interpreted as a sentence of condemnation and of judgment—that, for example, given to Balaam to go with the messengers of Balak; a command for an imperfect service, given to those who are still in the childhood state of Christian development, the constant command to the Israelites, varying with their slow development, like those to which we have above referred; finally, the perfect ideal, like that which is set forth in the prophets, where the burden of the Lord rested upon the soul of the man who had a vision of the King in his glory, and whose utterances as the mouthpiece of the divine decree are the noblest that have fallen from human lips. We need to have regard for Principal Ottley's caution that

"The morality of the Old Testament" is a phrase to be used with discrimination. There is the morality which God tolerates as the best that can be attained under the conditions and circumstances of those with whom he is dealing. There is the morality which he approves and delights in, because it rises above the average level of the age in which it appears. There is the morality at which he aims—the final or perfect morality which is disclosed in the spotless life of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, there is the morality recognized or allowed by the standard generally prevalent at a particular time, but retrogressive in so far as it falls short of a higher standard already acknowledged. And it is this which is plainly described as hateful to God, and as bringing down upon men the fire of his judgment; as, for instance, David's great sin which displeased the Lord and gave occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme. (*Op. cit.*, p. 421.)

Even in the historical narratives the eternal requirement of God for man and his thoughts concerning sin are made abundantly manifest. The written law was everywhere imperfect. The resulting life was a slow but upward struggle. The conception, the aim, the end, were not only the noblest the world has known, but constitute the one abiding revelation of God.

Jesus discloses this the moment he begins his preaching and turns to the interpretation of the old economy. With a word he strips off the husk. He sweeps aside the transient and the incomplete, and sets forth in perpetual validity the enduring truth. Is it a question of the relation of man and

woman in divorce or adultery? "Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." Is it a question of one's enemy, or how he is to be regarded? "Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you." Is it a question of the sabbath? "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath." Is it of Jerusalem and the temple? "God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."⁴ Thus, as Augustine said, "the New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and the Old Testament is opened out in the New;" and as the rabbis declare: "All the prophets prophesied only of the Messiah."

So it comes to pass that the precepts and models of the New Testament may often present to us what seem counsels of perfection, a pattern of an ideal Christian life far beyond the possibility of our attainment, while, on the other hand, in the childhood of our faith, when the strong meat of the Word is beyond us and we need the milk for babes, the stories and the prayers, the psalms and the confessions, of the Old Testament speak more directly to our hearts, and, as experience has so often shown, start impulses of life and minister consolations which open for us a way of courage and of attainment that otherwise were closed. We have no occasion to apologize for the Old Testament. We leave the difficulties of its history and its composition to the studies of the scholars. We take it for what it has always been, the story and the instrument of God's revelation of himself to a sinful and sorrowful world of men in the darkness of their transgression and the hopelessness of a life shut out from God by the consciousness of their own helplessness and guilt. To such it comes as not only a story of God striving to lift men to himself, with the possibility of occasional attainment on the part of some patriarch or saint, but also of God's

⁴ Cf. PROFESSOR VALETON, *Christus und das Alte Testament* (p. 18): "Through him every part of Scripture falls into its proper place; the small, perhaps long over-valued, becomes small; the great, perhaps like the cornerstone chosen of God, but only disregarded by men, becomes great. He brings life and movement; he brings *xplōis*; the Scriptures are 'fulfilled.'"

gracious condescension to the multitude of men like ourselves, not willing that any should perish, and from the beginning seeking to save that which is lost. It was an old and far-away world, but one lying strangely near to our own in its needs, its sorrows, its temptations—one through which the living God, in finding a method of speech to it, has spoken of pardon and of life to the men of all time.



ANGEL.—MELOZZO DA FORLÌ